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ABSTRACT

The Lincoln, Nebraska Volunteer Probation Counselor Program is an example of community involvement in the corrections process. Through careful screening, volunteers are selected and then trained to assist the local probation staff in counseling and supervising probationers. After being extensively interviewed, both volunteers and probationers are matched on the basis of mutual interests and the probationer's specific personal needs. The volunteer serves as friend, role model, supervisor, or counselor, depending on the probationer's needs. The relationship is designed to help the probationer understand himself better and see the world more realistically and constructively. Ultimately, the goal is to reduce the likelihood that he will turn to more serious crimes. Using this approach, the Lincoln program has worked with high-risk misdemeanant probationers. This brochure briefly describes the program. (Author)

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THE VOLUNTEER PROBATION COUNSELOR PROGRAM

Lincoln, Nebraska

AN EXEMPLARY PROJECT

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE

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The Lincoln Volunteer Probation Counselor Program is one of 13 programs which have earned the LEAA "exemplary" label. Projects are nominated through the LEAA regional offices and the state planning agencies and are examined by an independent evaluator to verify their:

- overall effectiveness in reducing crime or improving criminal justice;
- adaptability to other jurisdictions;
- objective evidence of achievement;
- demonstrated cost effectiveness.

Validation results are then submitted to the Exemplary Projects Advisory Board, made up of LEAA and state planning agency officials, which makes the final decision.

For each Exemplary Project, LEAA publishes a range of information materials, including a brochure and a detailed manual. Single copies are available free of charge from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Washington, D.C. 20531

FOREWORD

The Lincoln, Nebraska, Volunteer Probation Counselor Program is an excellent example of community involvement in the corrections process. Through careful screening, volunteers are selected and then trained to assist the local probation staff in counseling and supervising probationers.

Precise matching of volunteer and probationer is a hallmark of the Lincoln program. After extensive interviews with both volunteer and probationer, the two are matched on the basis of mutual interests and the probationer's specific personal needs.

The volunteer serves as friend, role model, supervisor, or counselor, depending upon the probationer's needs. The relationship is designed to help the probationer understand himself better and see the world more realistically and constructively. Ultimately, the goal is to reduce the likelihood that he will turn to more serious crimes.

Using this approach, the Lincoln program has worked with high-risk misdemeanant probationers—those with more serious behavioral problems. Its achievements have earned it the LEAA "exemplary" label as one of 13 outstanding criminal justice projects selected to date.

The National Institute believes that other communities may be interested in learning about Lincoln's volunteer probation counseling methods. This brochure briefly describes the program. A detailed operations manual is now in preparation, and publication will be announced in the near future. Copies will be available from the National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Washington, D.C. 20531.

Gerald M. Caplan
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Enforcement and Criminal
Justice

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THE PROGRAM

Recidivism figures make it clear that for many offenders incarceration is not warranted and judges have sought other means of controlling those found guilty of criminal offenses. As a result, various types of community-based correctional programs are being widely used. Probation, in particular, is an increasingly common case disposition for certain types of young offenders.

In many areas, however, professional probation resources cannot keep pace with growing caseloads. Skillful use of volunteers is one way to alleviate the burden on professional staff. Volunteers also can help to strengthen the effectiveness of a probation program because citizen involvement in probation activities fosters a better relationship between the probationer and the community.

Volunteer programs abound in the criminal justice system. Using the talent and energy of concerned citizens to optimum advantage, however, requires sound program guidelines. The Volunteer Probation Counselor Program of Lincoln, Nebraska, is an outstanding example of the effective use of volunteers in a probation setting.

The Lincoln program's primary goal is to help rehabilitate high-risk misdemeanants between the ages of 16 and 25. A probationer is assigned to a volunteer for supervision and assistance, matched on the basis of mutual interests and the probationer's interpersonal needs. Volunteer counselors, all of whom have been carefully screened and trained in counseling skills, are each responsible for a *single* probationer. After the relationship has been completed, over 70% of the volunteer counselors agree to be reassigned to counsel another youthful offender.

In addition to one-to-one counseling, citizens from the community provide services in a variety of different roles, serving as instructors and group leaders for court-conducted educational classes, performing clerical and public relations work for the Probation Office, tutoring offenders with reading deficiencies,

writing and editing a monthly newsletter, and planning and coordinating special meetings and activities.

The Lincoln program is coordinated by a member of the court's Probation Office. Volunteers serve without remuneration--not even out-of-pocket expenses. In return, they have an opportunity to help young people in trouble and make the criminal justice system function more effectively.

THE HIGH-RISK PROBATIONER

T.R. beat up another youth after the youth splashed a drink on the hood of T.R.'s newly washed and waxed car. The judge wanted to determine whether the youth's assaultive behavior indicated serious adjustmental problems or was only adolescent acting-out behavior, so a pre-sentence investigation was ordered. A Probation Officer interviewed T.R. and his family. The court psychologist assessed T.R.'s intellectual functioning, personality functioning, and social attitudes. The defendant's prior criminal offense record as well as employment and education reports were also considered. The probation staff met to determine the most suitable disposition for T.R. and made recommendations for an individualized probation program. The judge placed T.R. on probation supervision for one year.

The Lincoln presentence investigation report differentiates between high-risk and low-risk offenders. A high-risk offender is likely to commit additional offenses because of the presence of some or all of the following conditions: significant mental or emotional problems, antisocial attitudes, a relatively unstable family or living situation, anti-authority attitudes, and relatively limited personal assets. On the average, youths receiving volunteer services have 7.3 arrests and convictions prior to placement in the program.

A look into T.R.'s background revealed that he had been in serious trouble with the law before, chiefly because of his inability to control his temper. T.R.'s step-father, a heavy drinker, was rarely concerned with his whereabouts. T.R. had few friends and appeared to have only one love--his car.

As a result of the Probation Office's inquiries, T.R. was considered a high-risk offender. For T.R.

and others like him, routine contacts with the Probation Office are supplemented by counseling which begins the week after the offender is placed on probation. Most of these probationers are assigned to volunteer probation counselors.

THE VOLUNTEER

Recruitment

Volunteers are recruited in a number of ways. Two volunteer bureaus, one in the City of Lincoln and the other at the University of Nebraska, publicize the program and seek recruits. Occasional newspaper articles broaden public awareness of the program. Probation officers appear before community and university groups to discuss volunteer activities. Enthusiastic current volunteers and other interested persons also help to spread the word about the program.

J.M. is a 27-year-old auto mechanic. J.M. was an energetic, sometimes stubborn, and aggressive youth who rebelled against his family and expectations of others while he was attending high school. He wanted to prove himself and be successful with his life. He moved out of his family home and spent a few years going from job to job, drinking, partying, and feeling frustrated and not very happy. A concerned employer took a special interest in J.M. and helped him to understand himself better and redirect the course of his life into socially useful channels. The young man appreciated the special help and quickly devoted his energies toward becoming the best auto mechanic around. He worked very hard and achieved recognition, respect, and more money by developing a socially useful trade. His hard work, self-determination, and persistence were rewarded recently when he became the manager of his own service station. J.M. heard about the Volunteer Probation Counselor Program through a friend and applied for a volunteer position.

Screening

The screening of volunteers is quite thorough. Recruits are judged on the basis of information provided on the application form, interviews with the volunteer coordinator, psychological testing, and performance during training. The volunteer's occupation, education, organizational affiliations and activities, hobbies and special interests, tutor-

ing or counseling experience, and family background are taken into consideration. The candidate's motives for wanting to become a counselor are closely scrutinized. Volunteers who are genuinely motivated to help younger people become useful and productive citizens and/or are interested in a professional career in counseling are usually selected. The program rejects applicants who will be unable to spend sufficient time with a probationer; who are gullible, faddish, domineering, vengeful; or who want to escape personal problems through involvement in the program.

Probation personnel recognized J.M.'s potential as a volunteer. Although he lacked professional counseling skills, J.M. was willing and motivated to devote some of his time to working with troubled young people. His own successful adjustment and newly-won standing in the community led to his selection as a volunteer counselor.

Training

Each volunteer receives approximately eight hours of instruction during three evening sessions. The candidate's performance during training is the final screening element.

The first session includes an introduction to the program, a description of relevant community resources, and small-group discussions of study questions provided in a fictitious pre-sentence investigation report.

The second session focuses on counseling skills, the nature of high-risk offenders, and techniques for handling crisis situations. A judge briefly describes the legal system and the role of probation. Role playing cards, which portray typical crisis situations in the counseling relationship, are distributed to the class to help them prepare for the following evening. The third session is devoted to role playing in which volunteer applicants portray the probationer and the volunteer counselor facing a serious crisis situation. Staff and other volunteer applicants comment and provide constructive feedback about the role playing.

Volunteers are initiated into the program at a formal swearing-in ceremony in court by the judge, who then distributes identification cards.

Supervision

Although screening and training yield highly qualified volunteers, some guidance and support from the professional Probation Office staff is still necessary. Periodic review meetings are held between volunteers

and probation staff to assess probationers' progress and to discuss problems. Monthly seminars provide information about special interest topics, such as employment resources, drug problems, and approaches to counseling. Small groups of volunteers meet in a home to discuss problems in counseling relationships on a bi-weekly or monthly basis. Finally, probation staff are on call to help in crises which arise in the volunteer's counseling work.

Evaluation of Volunteer Performance

Each volunteer's performance is periodically evaluated by the probation staff. They assess the volunteer's success in reducing the client's involvement with the criminal justice system, the client's opinion of the volunteer's availability and effectiveness, and the volunteer's participation in the various review meetings and seminars.

Because of the care taken in selecting volunteers, their performance is generally found to be satisfactory. Evaluation is necessary, however, because unexpected changes in the volunteer's attitude may occur as the probationer/volunteer relationship evolves.

PUTTING THE TWO TOGETHER

The Lincoln program defines four general types of relationships used to guide the matching process: role model, friend/companion, supervisor/custodian, or primary counselor.

Role Model

Some probationers lack a suitable adult model to aid them in planning for the future and clarifying their roles in the community. The matching process considers the age, sex, ethnic background, occupation, socio-economic status and interests of the volunteer.

On the surface, T.R. resembles a younger J.M. Both are intensely interested in automobiles, and T.R.'s basic talents as a mechanic could grow and develop with J.M.'s guidance. Since none of the matching criteria points to the contrary, J.M. is selected as a "role model" for T.R.

Friend-Companion

Some probationers are unable to relate well to older volunteers. Often the youthful offender is rebelling against the family or the community and could benefit from a dependable friend whom he or she can trust. A conscientious, responsible volunteer, who is slightly

older than the offender, and has some similar interests, can fill this need. They can share interests, hobbies, and recreational activities. Compatibility, rather than counseling skill, is the key.

Supervisor/Custodian

A small percentage of probationers have very limited personal assets. The program's hope is to keep them functioning in the community rather than in an institution. These young people need assistance in the basics: managing finances, obtaining and keeping a job, and finding suitable recreational outlets. The volunteer must be patient, dedicated, and resourceful. Each day the probationer functions in the community is a sign of success. Older citizens have been particularly effective in this kind of relationship.

Primary Counselor

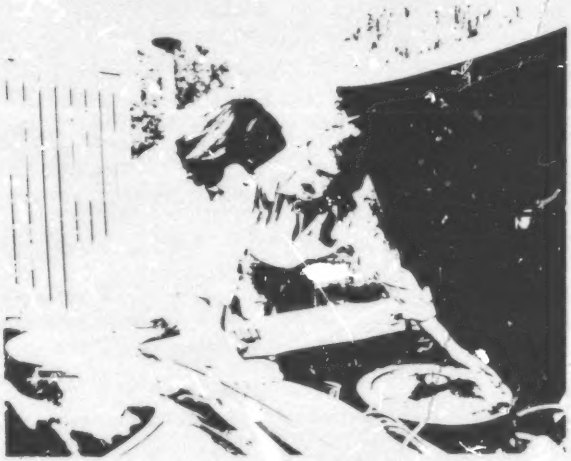
Some probationers have personal or emotional problems which can be alleviated by talking about them. The probationer may be an articulate youth with some insight into himself and the causes of his problems. A volunteer counselor hopefully will help him to relieve his anxieties, modify some of his attitudes, and solve some of his problems. To be effective, this role requires a sensitive volunteer with good counseling skills. Most of the volunteers assigned to this type of relationship have had professional training in counseling.

INTERACTION

Interaction between the volunteer and probationer is obviously necessary if the probationer's behavior is to improve. To establish a sound relationship and create the climate for change, the volunteer and probationer initially must meet on a weekly basis. In Lincoln, volunteer-probationer relationships last about 10 months and include about 30 regularly scheduled one-hour meetings plus additional meetings during times of emergency or crisis.

During an initial three to four week period prior to

assignment, the probation staff offers direct counseling services to the probationer, including individual counseling, family psychotherapy. and group counseling. After this preassignment counseling period, contact between the probationer and regular staff is minimal.



Successful counselors participate in a variety of activities with the probationer, including recreation, employment assistance, educational assistance, and everyday activities, such as shopping, dining, or working together around the house.

RESULTS

The results of the Lincoln Volunteer Probation Counselor Program are illustrated in the following tables. Comparisons are shown between 40 high-risk probationers who were assigned to volunteer counselors and 44 high-risk probationers who proceeded through regular probation. Both groups had similar prior criminal offense records and personality characteristics. The group assigned to volunteers had far less involvement with the criminal justice system during the probation year.

The first table indicates that 55 percent of the volunteer program participants committed at least one additional offense, compared to 70 percent of the regular probation group. When non-traffic offenses are considered, the difference is much greater--15 percent for the volunteer group compared to almost 64 percent for the regular group. And, only 10 percent of the volunteer

program group committed more than one additional offense during the probationary year, compared to 52.5 percent of the regular probation group.

RECIDIVISM DURING THE PROBATIONARY YEAR

	Volunteer Program (N=40)	Regular Probation (N=44)
Additional offenses	55.5%	70.5%
Additional non-traffic offenses	15.0%	63.7%
More than one additional offense	10.0%	52.5%

The next table shows the number of offenses committed prior to and during the probationary year for the two samples of high risk probationers and for low-risk probationers in regular probation. The offenses for which individuals were placed on probation are not included in these counts. Remarkable differences in the performance of the two high-risk groups are apparent from the table. For example, there was a 93 percent *reduction* in theft-related offenses for the volunteer program group, compared to a 91 percent *increase* in such offenses for the other high-risk group. The relatively small number of offenses committed by the low-risk group, both prior to and during probation, serves to illustrate the validity of the high-risk/low-risk classification.

CRIMINAL OFFENSES COMMITTED DURING THE PERIOD ONE YEAR PRIOR TO PROBATION AND DURING THE PROBATIONARY YEAR

	High Risk						Low Risk		
	Volunteer Program (n=40)			Regular Probation (n=44)			(n=20)		
Offenses	Year Before	During	Percent Reduction	Year Before	During	Percent Reduction	Year Before	During	Percent Reduction
Theft-related	14	1	93%	11	21	(91%)*	0	1	(–)
Anti-social	29	7	76%	16	25	(56%)	4	0	100%
Alcohol-Drug	31	9	71%	31	13	58%	6	1	83%
Major traffic	51	16	68%	48	30	38%	30	3	90%
Minor traffic	25	24	4%	23	26	(13%)	8	0	100%
Totals	150	57	62.0%	129	115	10.9%	48	5	89.8%

* ( ) indicates an increase

Based on these results, the program is extremely cost-effective. The volunteers are obtained at no expense beyond the time required to recruit, train, and supervise them. In Lincoln, this amounts to approximately 350 hours per year for 77 volunteers, or about 12 percent of total probation staff time. From all indications, this small investment has yielded substantial dividends for the probationer, the criminal justice system, and the community.